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The Drama of the Universe

by
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THE DRAMA OF THE UNIVERSE

BY LEWIS MILLIGAN

FREDERICK W. H. MYERS has a searching stanza to which we might well turn in these perplexing times:

*Great were his fate who on the earth could linger,
Sleep for an age and stir himself again,
Watching the terrible and fiery finger
Shrivel the falsehood from the souls of men.*

Time is a great shriveller.

We have no need to linger upon the earth beyond a lifetime, for within the past few years we have watched the "terrible and fiery finger" shrivelling the falsehood from the souls of men and the souls of political systems. We are like men who have slept and have awakened to find ourselves in a new era of the world.

But are we any better or more enlightened for this experience? Having got rid of one set of lying dictators we must be on guard against the rise of others. "There is no discharge in that war." There is a besetting danger of tyranny even in the apparently idealistic systems that are being put forward for the social betterment of mankind.

Humanity is for ever looking forward to better things to come, and this expectancy is intensified in times of stress or uncertainty. Hitler took full advantage of such a time, and with an offer of a planned economy he captured the will of the German people and enslaved them body and soul. He assured them that they were to have a New Order of peace and prosperity that would last for a thousand years. It is hard to believe that any people could be deceived by so gigantic and transparent a falsehood, but there are still some people who are ready to fall for a similar lie.

This anticipation of better things to come is inherent in the heart of man, and it is basically a spiritual urge. St.

Paul speaks of "the earnest expectation of the creature." With the ancient Hebrews it was an expectancy of the coming of a Messiah, and this expectancy was at its height about the time of Christ when there were many who announced themselves as the promised deliverer of Israel. It is perhaps significant that since the coming of Christ the Messianic hope among the Jews has faded out, which may be regarded as a tacit admission that Jesus was their Messiah, although they rejected Him. The present Zionist movement may be a revival of the Messianic hope, but it appears to have deteriorated, as it did before Christ, into a political movement.

Even among the Twelve Disciples there were those who thought that Jesus was to be the deliverer of the Jews from the Roman yoke and that eventually he would restore and assume the throne of David as King of the Jews. Peter was among those who clung to this idea almost to the end when he tried to defend Jesus with the sword. Judas was the first to be disillusioned, and he sold himself to the enemy when he realized that the Kingdom of which Jesus spoke was "not of this world." That is the besetting sin of the Christian churches today.

Discussing the question of Socialism the other evening with a friend of mine, a sincere Christian minister, he declared that Karl Marx had "stolen" the idea of a socialist society from Jesus Christ. Karl Marx would have laughed at that. He understood the gospel of Jesus far better than some who profess to preach it today, and he would have none of it. Marx denounced the Christian religion as the "opiate of the people," by which he meant that it turned the people away from the realization of all their aspirations in a materialistic Utopia. Marx was right from his own point of view.

If Christ came into this world to set up an economic and social system similar to that of Socialism, then history shows His mission to have been an utter failure; and so far

from being a divine person, His political intelligence was far below that of Karl Marx. The Apostle Paul spoke the plain and undeniable truth when he declared: "If in this life only we have hope in Christ, then we are of all men most miserable."

There was no "if" in the gospel of Karl Marx. To him men had no souls; they were not even individuals, but were to be treated in the mass like herds of cattle. The only distinction that Marx saw in mankind was that of "classes", and his only prescription for progress was to start a war to the death between them. "Classes" and "masses" have been the catchwords and the obsession of socialists ever since. They speak of them as if they were different and distinct animal species which had no generic relationship with each other.

A PILGRIM'S PROGRESS

CHRISTIANITY, on the other hand, envisions society as a human family made up of individuals who are variously endowed with talents and temperaments for which they are personally responsible to develop and control. Time is linked with eternity, and every man is a pilgrim journeying day by day across this ever changing and soul-testing terrain of time. In his pilgrimage he has to pass through many trials, through the sloughs of despondency, through doubting castles, through perilous and dark valleys of death, and through Vanity Fairs.

Some good Christians seem to regard it as the sole duty of the Church to rid this world of these perils and temptations so as to provide the coming generation with a free and safe passage to the Celestial City. They would abolish Vanity Fair by act of parliament. But John Bunyan knew better than that when he said:

"The way to the Celestial City lies just through this town, where this lusty fair is kept; and he that will go to the City, and yet not go through this town, must needs go out of the world."

I doubt if John Bunyan, the travelling tinker, would consign even the inhabitants of Vanity Fair to perdition, for his story was an allegory of the human soul. He would probably agree with Meredith's "Juggling Jerry" when at the end of his life of juggling he said:

*"I've studied men from my topsy turvy
Close, and I reckon, rather true.
Some are fine fellows: some, right scurvy:
Most, a dash between the two."*

Those of us who have travelled any distance and mingled with various sorts and conditions of men will readily agree with that bit of homely philosophy. And we will agree that the "right scurvy" are by no means confined to the associates of Vanity Fair.

Some years ago when I was reporting an annual church Assembly in Kingston, there happened to be a travelling circus in the city—typical of the Vanity Fair which Bunyan depicted, although that term had a much wider application. After sending off my copy around midnight I went to a restaurant and while there I noticed a group of men and women off in a corner who were evidently members of the circus. The faces of the women still retained the stage makeup. What struck me about those people was the unwonted silence and mournfulness of their demeanour. When the meal was served a nondescript youngish man at the head of the table made a sign to the company, bowed his head reverently and in a subdued voice said grace, which seemed to me to be more in the nature of a prayer.

That night I was awakened by the strains of slow and solemn music beneath my hotel window. At first I thought it was a dream. I rose and tried to look out but could see nothing as it was pitch dark, and I still thought that I must be dreaming. The music, which I now recognized as Chopin's Funeral March, gradually died away into the distance. The following morning at breakfast I learned that

a circus clown had died the previous day, and that they had borne his body in a procession to the railway station for shipment to his home town in the United States.

There are all kinds of men and women in the vanity fairs of this world, and each of them is a pilgrim, and none know it better than the members of a travelling circus.

I have cited the above personal experience to illustrate and emphasize what I believe to be the fundamental teachings of Christianity in regard to the individual, and also the prime purpose of the Christian Church in this world. I am not deeply concerned as to whether the application of this circus incident agrees with the apparent narrow theology implied in *Pilgrim's Progress*, but I may say that I think John Bunyan was far more broadminded and sympathetic toward human nature than he appears to be. He was essentially a poet and he insisted that his story should not be taken literally, but that he was writing in "similitudes."

So far as the "City of Destruction" is concerned, however, Bunyan's prediction has been literally fulfilled many times over in the past six years, and with the arrival of the atomic bomb there is an impending possibility of our own great cities being wiped out in the twinkling of an eye. The civilized nations might well observe the warning to "Flee from the wrath to come."

RELIGION AND CIVILIZATION

"All history proves that material and scientific advance which leaves unsatisfied the deeper needs of the soul will eventually come to an end."

THAT IS A QUOTATION from a book entitled "On Roman Roads With St. Paul," by the late R. Martin Pope, and it sums up in brief the need of the present day which Christianity alone can supply.

Writing 125 years ago in his "History of Civilization," Guizot, the great French historian and philosopher (who was, by the way, a Protestant) said: "At all times, in all countries, religion has assumed the glory of having civilized the people; science, letters, arts, all the intellectual and moral pleasures, have a share in this glory." Guizot insists that the civilizing influence of Christianity has been exerted chiefly through the individual; that the perfecting of civil life, the development of society must depend upon the quality and the freedom of its individual members. He asks: "Is the human species after all a mere ant-hill, a society in which all that is required is order and physical happiness, in which the greater the amount of labor, the more equitable division of the fruits of labor, the more surely is the object attained, the progress accomplished? Our instinct at once feels repugnant to so narrow a definition of human destiny."

Referring to the early days of Christianity, Guizot said: "Christianity in no degree addressed itself to the social state; it announced aloud, that it would not meddle with the social state; it ordered the slave to obey his master; it attacked none of the great evils, the great wrongs of society of that period. Yet who will deny that Christianity was a great crisis of civilization? Why was it so? Because it changed the internal man, creeds, sentiments; because it regenerated the moral man, the intellectual man."

I have quoted this passage not because I believe that the Christian Church should in these days remain silent in regard to great social wrongs and moral evils, but rather to stress the historical fact that Christianity's contribution to the progress of civilization has been made chiefly through its spiritual and moral influence upon the people. Where the Christian Church—or any religious institution, such as Hinduism, for instance—assumed political power or controlled the State, the result has been religious corruption and social deterioration.

THE MARCH OF PROVIDENCE

GUIZOT speaks of civilization as the "great drama of the universe," and "the march of Providence," which he says is not restricted to any narrow limits. The progress of civilization may appear to us to be slow, but its logic is none the less true and sound: "To Providence, time is nothing; it strides through time as the gods of Homer through space; it makes but one step, and ages have vanished behind it. How many centuries, what infinite events passed away before the regeneration of the moral man by Christianity exercised upon the regeneration of the social state its great and legitimate influence. Yet who will deny that it any the less succeeded?"

That is a spacious vision of things that are past, and it opens up an infinite vista of the future. It also testifies to the greatness of man and his relationship to that divine Providence which moves through all things. It was to give to man a fuller consciousness of that relationship that Christ came into this world; to awaken men to a realization of their immortality, their personal responsibility and high destiny.

"Is it to perfect his social condition, to ameliorate his existence upon the earth, that man develops himself, his faculties, sentiments, ideas, his whole being?" asks Guizot. "Or rather, is not the amelioration of the social condition, the progress of society, society itself, the theatre, the occasion of the development of the individual, in a word, is society made to serve the individual, or the individual to serve society?"

On the answer to that question, says Guizot, "depends whether the destiny of man is purely social; whether society drains up and exhausts the whole man; or whether he bears within him something extrinsic—something superior to his existence on earth."

To sum up his argument, Guizot quotes the following

passage from a speech delivered in the French parliament by his friend Royer-Collard:

"Human societies are born, live, and die, on the earth; it is there their destinies are accomplished . . . But they contain not the whole man. After he has engaged himself to society, there remains to him the noblest part of himself, those high faculties by which he elevates himself to God, to a future life, to unknown felicity in an invisible world . . . We, persons individual and identical, veritable beings endowed with immortality, we have a different destiny from that of states."

ETERNAL PRINCIPLES

I AM WELL AWARE that the modern political economist and religio-sociologist will scoff at all this as "old-stuff," and I may be told that political science and philosophy have advanced far beyond the ideas and conclusions of Guizot, over a century ago. But I contend that in the foregoing quotations Guizot has laid down eternal principles which are just as true and applicable to the social problems of today as they ever were—and even more so in view of the disastrous world wars which have been the direct results of attempts to force the pace of social and national progress by anti-Christian revolutionists.

Both Socialism and Fascism were born out of Marxism. They are based on the assumption that the chief end of man is social or national. They are forms of religion which elevate the System or the State to the position of a Providence and lower the people to the level of rigidly organized servants of the State who have no individual freedom. Such freedom in such a society cannot be permitted because it would be a constant source of disruption to the mechanism of the system. Freedom of thought, speech, criticism and opposition must therefore be repressed, and those who attempt to exercise it are put out of the way.

Whatever may be said in favor of such a system of society, so far as social equality and economic security are concerned, it cannot truthfully be described as a state of civilization, because civilization is not a system but an active process or condition of society in which the people are *civilizing themselves*. In this process, individual freedom, personal responsibility and even social insecurity are essential to a progressive civilization.

"There have been a great number of small aristocratic republics," says Guizot, "in which the people have been treated like flocks of sheep, well kept and materially happy, but without moral and intellectual activity." And he asks, "Is this civilization?"

What, then, is civilization? History answers that question: It is the great Drama of the Universe, in which ancient civilizations such as Assyria, Egypt, Greece and Rome have all played their part. In all of those civilizations there were forms of religion which, however crude or fantastic they may appear to us, were a recognition of the inherent spiritual nature of man. But they were, for the most part, national or collectivist religions in which the individual was not recognized as of any importance—except in the case of rulers, who were regarded as sons of the immortal gods.

"SONS OF GOD"

CHRISTIANITY brought a new and infinitely larger conception of human life and of the universe. The declaration, "Now are we the sons of God," must have been a startling and treasonable announcement to the people of Greece and Rome. It was a declaration of Spiritual Independence and the moral responsibility of the individual man. It did not propound or forecast the establishment of any particular social system, but it enabled the early Christians and their followers down through nearly two thousand years to pass through numerous changing systems, wars and revolutions, and hold fast to their faith in their immortal destiny.

The falsehood that has been shrivelled from the souls of men and of systems in the past thirty years is the falsehood that man is an economic animal, and that all of his yearnings and aspirations can be satisfied by enclosing him in an economic system which provides him with social security from the cradle to the grave. If it were not for that word "grave" there might be some hope for an economic solution of the social problems of human life. One has no need to wander through a cemetery and read the inscriptions on tombstones to realize that human beings are not satisfied with their brief span of life on this planet. Even the Soviet Government, which has done its utmost to banish religion, has come to realize that the three-score-years-and-ten span of life isn't long enough, and has recently ordered Russian scientists to discover some means of extending it to 150 years.

No economic Utopia can ever satisfy the souls of men, because it is a dead-end street. Life is a highway, a pilgrimage of the soul through this perilous and interesting, and often delightful region of time.

"Friend, whither away? Are you going to the heavenly country?"